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Mexico Stresses Ties With Cuba In an Apparent Rebuff to Reagan

By ALAN RIDING
Special to The New York Times

MEXICO CITY, Feb. 20—In an apparent rebuff to the Reagan Administration, President José López Portillo has gone out of his way to stress Mexico's close ties with Cuba just three days after a United States delegation arrived here with what it called proof of Havana's support for Salvadoran guerrillas.

After the signing of a sugar agreement with Cuba yesterday, Mr. López Portillo said that Cuba was the Latin American country "most dear" to Mexico. He went on to describe relations between the two countries as an example "for our region, for our continent and for the world."

Mexican officials said that they believed Mr. López Portillo's statement was intended as Mexico's response to American efforts to hold Cuba responsible for sending arms to Marxist guerrillas trying to oust the United States-backed junta in El Salvador.

The Mexican Government, which has traditionally used its ties with Cuba to demonstrate its independence of Washington, is also reportedly alarmed that United States policy toward the current conflict in El Salvador could turn the Caribbean basin into the scene of a major East-West power struggle.

Officials pointed out that the López Portillo Administration had not only criticized stepped-up American military assistance for the Salvadoran junta, but was also disturbed by the Reagan Administration's attempt to rally support for its contention that the Soviet bloc was aiding the guerrillas.

"Mexico is not going to be pressured into choosing between friendship with the United States and Cuba," one well-placed official said. "Reagan has to learn that this is the wrong approach".

With Mexico openly sympathetic to the Marxist-led opposition in El Salvador, foreign diplomats here also predicted today that United States policy in Central America could become the first serious test of the new Administration's relations with Mexico.

Mr. Reagan, while still President-elect, met with Mr. López Portillo at the United States-Mexican border on Jan. 5 as a gesture of his desire to improve ties with Mexico. Although the two are to meet again in late April, however, officials here fear that the cordial atmosphere created by last month's meeting may not last.

On Monday a special delegation led by Gen. Vernon Walters, former deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, met with Mexico's Foreign Minister, Jorge Castaneda, and gave him documentary evidence purporting to confirm Havana's intervention in the Salvadoran struggle.

General Walters, who has since visited Venezuela and was reportedly also going to Brazil, Argentina and Chile, was refused an audience with Mr. López Portillo in Mexico City, although he did confer with the President's private secretary, Roberto Casillas.

Agreed to Keep Visit Secret

Mexican officials did agree, however, to a United States request for General Walters's visit to be kept secret, apparently to avert anti-American demonstrations here. Today, neither the Government nor the American Embassy in Mexico City was willing to confirm publicly that the special delegation had already been here.

Although Mr. López Portillo has previously criticized "the provocative declarations and bellicose preparations" of outside forces involved in El Salvador, yesterday was the first occasion on which he appeared to address — albeit in an indirect way typical of Mexican politics — the United States offensive against Cuba and the Soviet bloc.

"I wish to express my satisfaction at this singular act," he said, referring to the sugar agreement with Cuba, "because at a time of convulsions in the area to which we are attached historically and geographically, we are an example of what, with political good will, two nations can achieve."

"Such concrete examples in an area of conflict help create a basis for the peace that we all desire," he went on. "While many other forces seek to disintegrate and penetrate the area and interfere in its internal affairs, Mexico makes a permanent effort to preach not only with words but also with deeds."

'Give Embrace to My Commander'

Turning to the visiting Cuban minister of economic cooperation, Hector Rodríguez Llompart, Mr. López Portillo then concluded, in an apparent reference to Fidel Castro, "Give an embrace to my commander and a very fraternal salute to the people of Cuba."

Yesterday's agreement for Mexico to purchase 100,000 tons of Cuban sugar came just two months after Mexico agreed to help Cuba develop its energy potential. Although Cuba will continue to receive all its crude oil supplies from the Soviet Union, Mexico's state oil monopoly, Pemex, will assist in off-shore exploration and modernization of Cuba's oil refineries.

But Mexico's growing economic ties with Cuba are clearly also of enormous political significance. Mexico was in fact the only Latin American country not to follow the United States lead in breaking off diplomatic relations with Havana in the early 1960's.

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